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Hidden People

Researching undocumented migration

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Hidden people Researching undocumented migration

Susann Huschke

The following pictures were taken by Tillmann Engel as part of my research project on undocumented migration and health in Berlin (Huschke 2013). How can we study undocumented migration, and why should we? In my case, the answer to both of these questions is political activism and practical engagement. My collaboration with the Berlin-based Medibüro, a non-governmental organization and political collective providing healthcare to undocumented and uninsured migrants, significantly shaped and facilitated my research. A commitment to social and political change was the driving force behind this project, and it inspired the research methodology (see Huschke 2014). The photographs presented here were taken in 2010, two years after I first started interviewing Latin American migrants in Berlin. Most of the



With Mónica on our way to a medical appointment.

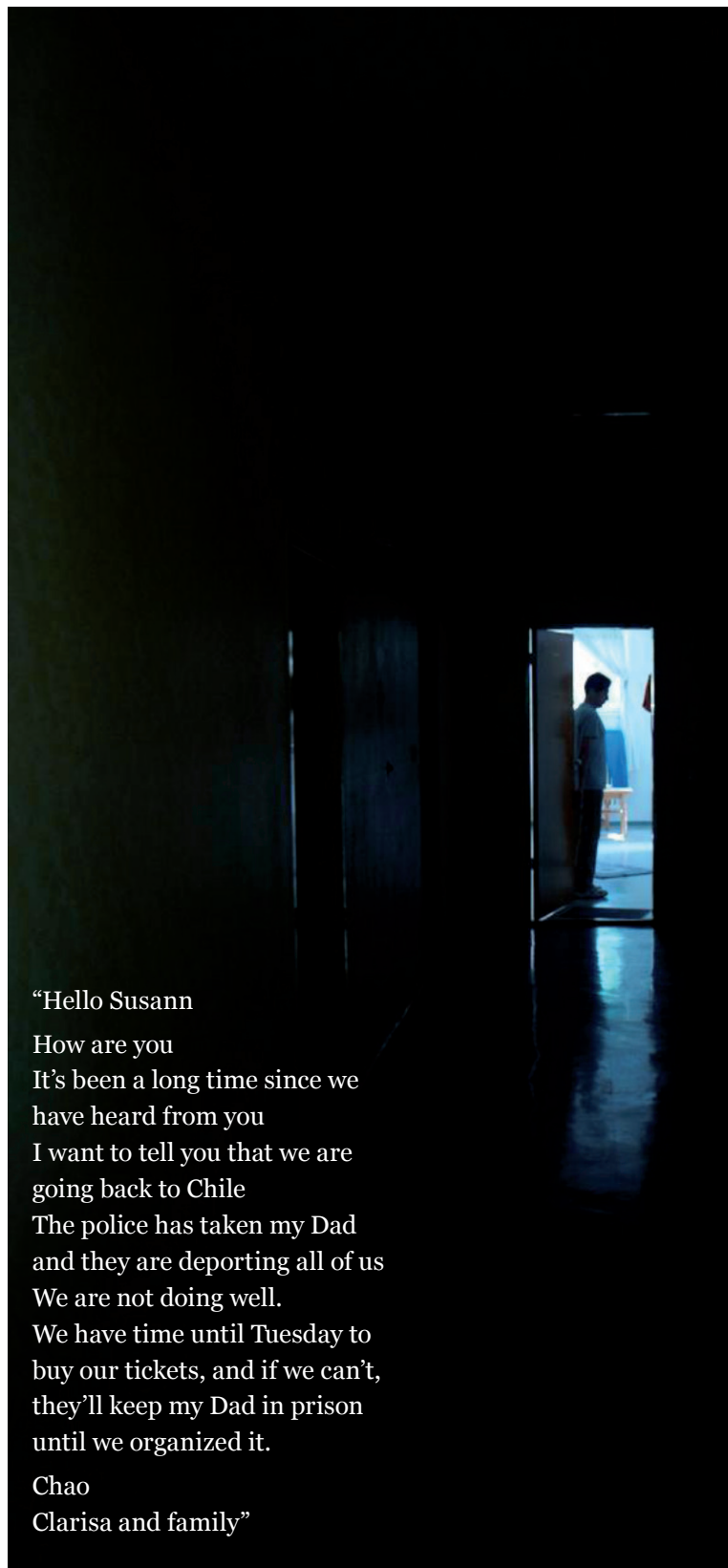
people portrayed here still keep in touch. Long-term relationships with individual people and with communities constitute the basis of ethnographic research, particularly in the field of undocumented migration, shaped by fear, insecurity and vulnerability, a field in which trust plays a major role in all social relationships. The photo series starts off with images that capture relationships and contexts, then moving on to some of the key issues for many undocumented migrants: fear and stigma, arrests and deportations, the struggle to find work, housing and childcare, worrying about one's health, and last but not least: nurturing hope.



With Luz in the park.



“But it isn’t easy to live like this... You always have to hide something, keep it secret. You are not free; you cannot talk freely about things.” (Luz)



“Hello Susann
How are you
It’s been a long time since we
have heard from you
I want to tell you that we are
going back to Chile
The police has taken my Dad
and they are deporting all of us
We are not doing well.
We have time until Tuesday to
buy our tickets, and if we can’t,
they’ll keep my Dad in prison
until we organized it.
Chao
Clarisa and family”



“And... the only thing I said when they arrested me was: ‘What crime have I committed? What did I do wrong? The only offense I committed was to work and send some money home. That’s all!’” (Esperanza)





Susann: And you came to Berlin because your sister lives here, too?

Luz: Yes. (...) And I arrived at my sister's, with the kid... And it turned out to not be that easy. I moved out because there were problems with her and Federico [her two-year old son]. He cried, and she was annoyed by the smell of the diapers, and that it was messy sometimes and all that.

Susann: Like it is with a kid, right?

Luz: Yea, and she didn't understand. So I decided to move out. But finding another apartment was really not easy.



Susann: How many hours did you work?

Dominga: Four hours, sometimes five. Six days a week.

Susann: And did they pay you?

Dominga: No, because their idea was: we bring you over here, we help you with that. We bring you here and then you pay with your labor. They reduced my debt by 50 Euros a month.

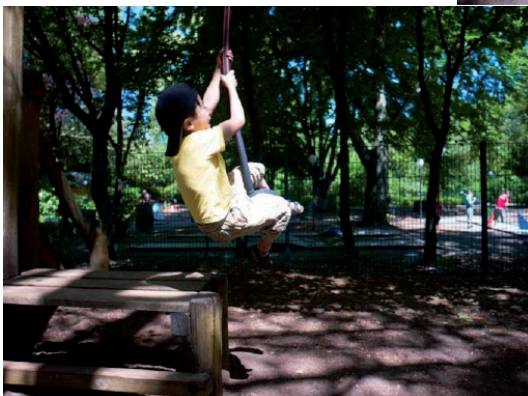
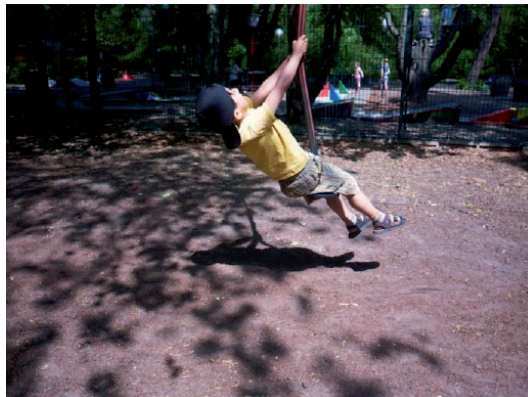




“So, listen, this is what happened to me. Two month after I got to Germany, a total wreck, I had no one, I knew no one. I was looking for a place to stay. And another Latina, Ecuadorian, from the same village, brought me to her place, so I could live there. And I paid her... I paid for the whole apartment! Despite the fact that she was supposedly helping me! What came out of that? I paid 350 Euros per month. And supposedly, she was helping me with that. But what it meant was that she let me pay for everything!” (Fernando)



“So that was difficult because, first of all, I didn’t have a kindergarden. I didn’t know where to leave him. I wanted to work, but couldn’t leave him anywhere. That was a problem, to find a kindergarden where they would accept us without

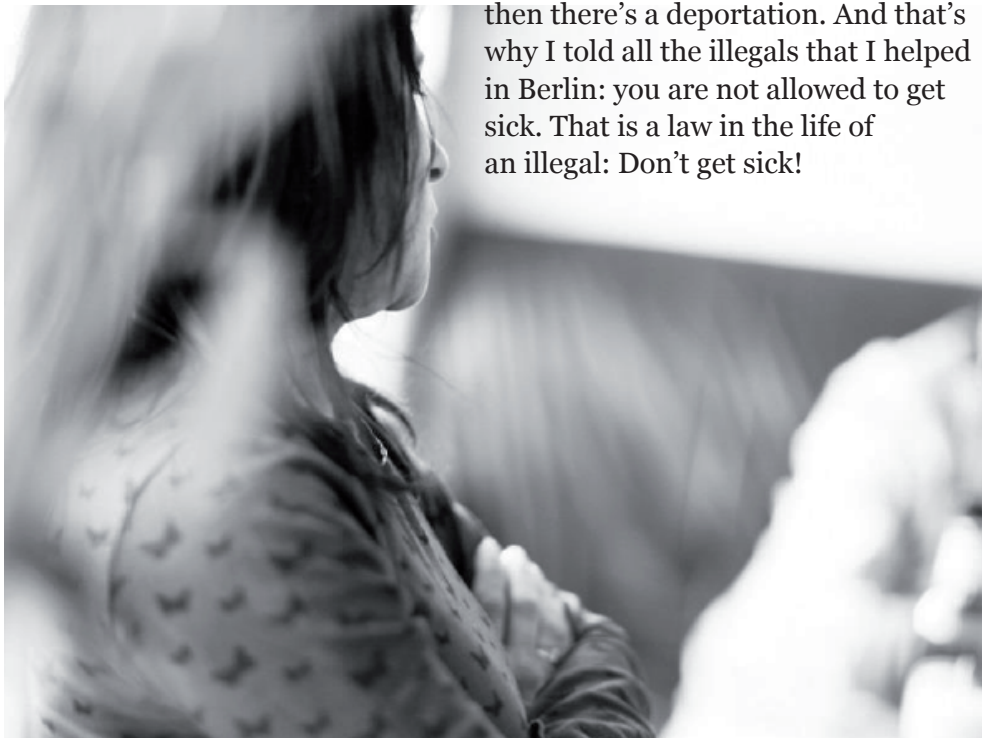


papers, because they all want to see papers. So that went on for half a year. I looked for work, took him with me. He was still very little, you know, I simply put him to sleep, like in Bolivia, in a carton box. That’s how it was.” (Luz)



Susann: So you never went to the doctor when you lived in Berlin?

Cesar: Um... no! I never went to the doctor, because for an illegal, it is forbidden to get sick. You can't get sick when you're illegal. If you get sick, you will have to pay a steep price: your deportation and a lot of money. (...) They call the police, and then there's a deportation. And that's why I told all the illegals that I helped in Berlin: you are not allowed to get sick. That is a law in the life of an illegal: Don't get sick!

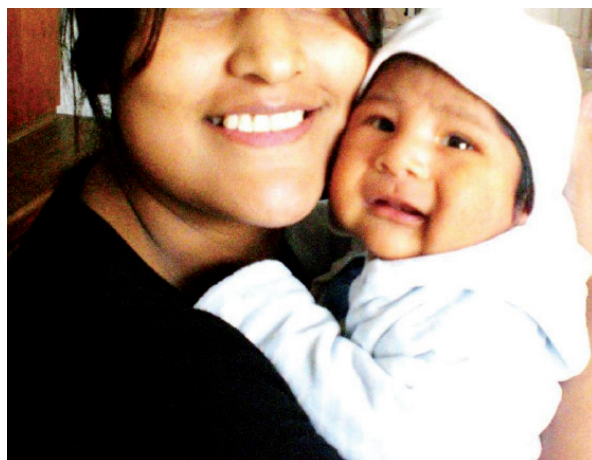


“Yes, if I had health insurance, I would go more often to get a check-up for my lupus. But now, because the doctors can’t treat me regularly, they always say, come back in three months or six months. I think that is because I don’t have insurance.” (Luz)





“And I always go: ‘Don’t fall! Don’t climb on that! Don’t play on the stairs! Watch out, make sure the other kids don’t push you, because if you fall, I don’t know where to take you, to which doctor.’ For example, if she breaks a foot or a leg, I don’t have any [insurance] that covers that.” (Marisol)





„How can I fight this injustice? I can't! Where should I complain? Where should I file an application to change my situation? Wherever I go, they will ask me: Are you married? Yes. To a German? No, to a Chilean [frowns]. Well, then you better go back to Chile! Because here, there's no possibility to stay. That is a burden you carry here. It wears you down, you see, you walk to the metro station, and the police shows up to check people's papers. That is a method, a psychological burden, for all of us here, but Marisol suffers even more than I do. If they want to see the papers that I don't have, they will deport me, they will treat me like a criminal, they will put me where they put the people who are illegal: prison.” (Andrés)

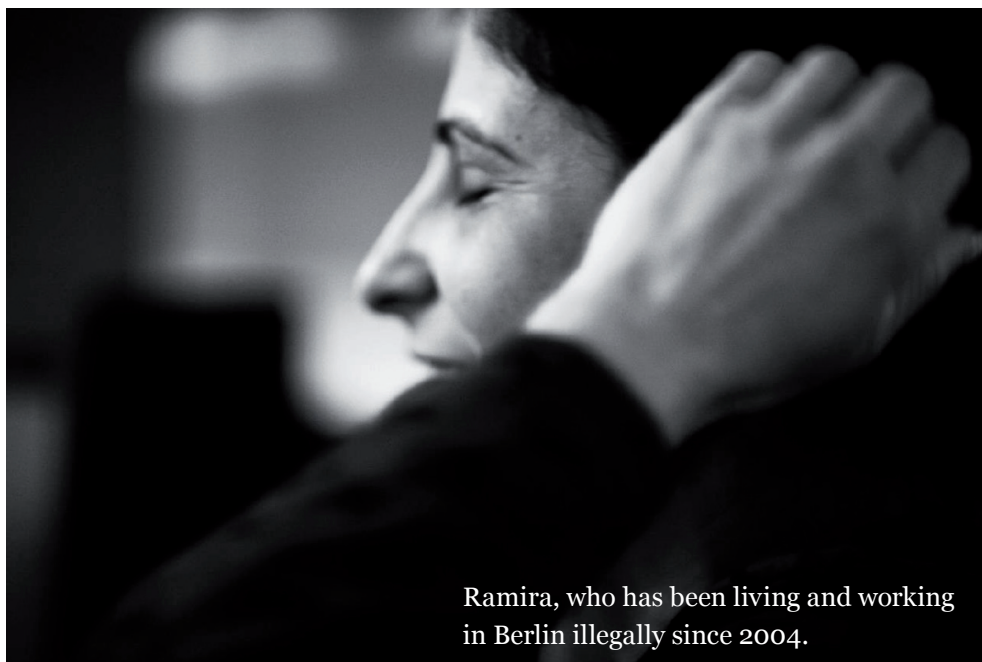
„In my church, we pray for the people without papers.
I don't have a visa, I don't have papers,
I ask God – we pray for that. The Lord has done many
miracles in this group,
many, many miracles! There were many people who
were illegal,
they came to church, they asked God, and now they
have papers.
They have a status and live well. (...) And when you
have this belief, things are easier, I can feel that.
That's how my life is going to continue, I know that!“
(Tabea)





“It is, however, predictable that the limitation on human mobility, just like the unequal treatment of women and slavery, will sooner or later end up on the garbage dump of history.”

(Düvell 2005: 52, translation SH)



Ramira, who has been living and working in Berlin illegally since 2004.

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Susann Huschke received her PhD in social and cultural anthropology (Freie Universität Berlin) in 2012 and is currently Research Fellow at the Institute of Conflict Transformation and Social Justice at Queen's University Belfast (UK). In her PhD research (2008-2010), she critically analyzed how illegalization affects the health and well-being of undocumented Latin American labor migrants in Berlin. Her current research focuses on sex work in Northern Ireland, particularly on the policy discourse, hegemonic moralities and stigma.

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